

WHAT A CHAMPIONSHIP MEANS TO A CLUB

by

LEONARD A. BLACKBURN
*Former President,
Country Club of Virginia,
Richmond, Va.*

IT seems to be the consensus of opinion, some time after the 1955 USGA Amateur Championship was held on the James River Course of the Country Club of Virginia, that it was the most successful and memorable golf event ever held in this section of the country.

The 55th Amateur was held under almost ideal conditions. The weather was perfect; the gallery was in a gala mood. The contestants gave every assurance and made comments that would indicate their pleasure with the challenge presented by the course, and the hospitality extended to them. The tournament was a success financially; that is, the auditors' statement indicated a profit of \$1900.00.

As the incoming President of the Country Club of Virginia when the invitation was submitted to my predecessor and the Board, I was not the least bit enthusiastic. As a matter of fact, I was opposed to it. It was the desire of the Board that whatever decision we reached, we should have the backing of enough of the membership to assure their support and a minimum of criticism.

To give the membership an opportunity to express their opinion, we polled over 800 golf members, asking if they were in favor of holding the 55th Amateur on the James River Course. Replies were overwhelmingly in favor of the tournament and many made comments on the card emphasizing their enthusiasm.

From then on, after the Board's approval, enthusiasm mounted. Several of us attended the 54th Amateur in Detroit to get some idea of the work behind a successful tournament. I must say that, at this point, my enthusiasm began to grow by leaps and bounds when I had an opportunity to see what a really grand thing it was to entertain the Amateur Championship.



LEONARD A. BLACKBURN

After the invitation had been accepted, about two years prior to the time of the tournament, we began to make our plans, appoint a general chairman and executive committee, and then a chairman of each of the major planning and operating committees. The intensive work was in the year before the tournament, more particularly, in the last three months. It was then that plans began to crystallize and it was possible to see results of the effort.

Early in the planning stages a Boosters Club was organized for the purpose of underwriting the tournament. However, unlike most groups of this type, composed of perhaps fifty members who contribute from one hundred to five hundred dollars individually, this club was composed of 426 golf enthusiasts. Each contributed fifty dol-

lars and a wealth of enthusiasm and desire to support an outstanding national event in Virginia. A number of these "Boosters" were not members of the Country Club of Virginia. Some did not live in the state of Virginia but came as far as Chicago, Pennsylvania and New York, as well as south of Richmond. For the fifty dollar membership fee, each Booster received one season ticket and was entertained at a banquet at which the officials of the USGA honored us with their presence.

Suggested Improvements

After USGA officials looked over our course, they suggested minor changes for the tournament, all of which were most acceptable to us. The changes and improvements suggested were all of a permanent nature. This fact has been recognized not only by the Board, Green Chairman and officials of the Club, but by the golfing members as well.

Everything was progressing on schedule and all was in tip-top shape, so far as the golf course and greens were concerned, until two months before the tournament. It was heart-breaking to see greens that were in near-perfect condition deteriorate almost to the extent and rapidity that you could observe it from day to day. We had a condition that prevailed all along the Atlantic seaboard, from the New England States through Richmond, about as far south as an attempt is made to have bent grass greens.

We really suffered through this period but, thanks to the USGA Green Section agronomists and local greenkeepers, the greens were pronounced in satisfactory condition for the tournament and they improved daily. Harvie Ward's score would lead one to conclude that the greens were in fine shape on the final day.

The question of most interest to golf clubs entertaining future Amateur Championships would probably be: What is the after-effect?

One of the strongest factors in a satisfactory post-tournament opinion is the pre-tournament enthusiasm. It is important that the planning be timed with the greatest care—not too long and not too short a

time—then followed through at such a rate that those interested can see the general program developing in a way that meets with their approval. Enthusiasm will begin to mount with disclosure of what each committee is doing to button it all up on the final day.

The atmosphere permeating the entire event, from the laborers on the greens and fairways, through every department of the Club, was most gratifying. Not to be outdone by the personnel of the Club, the membership warmly and spontaneously welcomed contestants, their wives, parents and followers.

Members of the Club took their position of host as a somewhat serious but enjoyable duty, and individually assumed the responsibility of seeing that their visitors' stay in Virginia was a happy one.

Memorable Experience

It was an experience I shall never forget and one that meant a great deal to me, because, as I stated previously, I was not enthusiastic in the beginning. Possibly my position was brought about by complaints from players against denying them the use of the course. Some of the top-notch 'beefers' have since commented on the tournament in a most favorable way. Some made statements like this: "I played the course and was delighted to discover that tournament play had in no way damaged the course. We have a better golf course than we have ever had or would have had, had we not entertained the tournament." Such remarks came from people who had opposed the tournament for various reasons.

The tournament was the highlight in the history of the Country Club of Virginia, from a golfing standpoint. It was appraised one of the greatest sporting events ever held in Richmond. I believe that a poll taken today would indicate no possible objection to a repeat tournament in a reasonable number of years to satisfy the enthusiasm of Virginia golfers.

It was a wonderful experience for the Club and those who participated in it are proud to have been a part of its success.